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## Book Review: Gillian Wearing and Claude Cahun: Behind the Mask, Another Mask

October 10, 2017

Art historian Jean Marie Carey reviews the National Portrait Gallery's publication Gillian Wearing and Claude Cahun: Behind the Mask, Another Mask.

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By Sarah Howgate with an essay by Dawn Ades. Published by the National Portrait Gallery, London, this catalogue accompanies the eponymous exhibition held at the NPG 17 March-29 September 2017; 208 pages with reproductions of the color and black and white photographs from

the show.

Since the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, Claude Cahun (1894–1954) has been closely studied by photography historians and it is not surprising that Young British Artist and identitarian Gillian Wearing (b. 1963) would be an admirer. What is a bit shy of shocking is that Wearing would risk the calculated humblebrag of making a body of work both in homage and comparison to Cahun's groundbreaking collection of stunning in-character self-portraits. This effort is presented as a parallel grouping either precisely mimicking, albeit in a larger format, or commenting on Cahun's transgressive complications through controlled variations.

The catalogue from "Behind the Mask, Another Mask," staged in the spring of 2017 at London's National Portrait Gallery includes an interview between Wearing and curator Sarah Howgate that explains the not-entirely-obvious pairing. The book casts Wearing's work in an introspective and admiring light and includes many of her guises from over the years, including a spread devoted to her longtime Polaroid auto-portrait project.

However Wearing's mirroring of Cahun's photographic legacy is interpreted, this exhibition catalogue is also timely in another way, marking a centennial. It was in 1917 the then-23-years-old Lucy Schwob adopted the pseudonym Claude Cahun. A lesbian, Jew, sometime Surrealist, anti-Nazi activist, and woman artist who defied the avant-garde role of the wife or muse, Cahun was a writer as well as photographer. The show takes its name from one of her many enigmatic epigrams – in fact I wish there were more of Cahun's words in this volume, and fewer of Wearing's.

It is impossible to concentrate on Cahun's artistic preoccupations of costume, masquerade, and concealment without also considering her courageous authorship within the social, commercial, and institutional conditions of the period from the 1920s through the 1940s, when she produced most of her photos. Regarded in the present, the self-portraiture work of the two photographers deal with fashionable subjects. This is absolutely not a defect, for arguments over sex, gender identification, resistance, and class warfare are the fundamental concerns of our time, which are often dealt with through the visual arts. How to recognize human reality in its singularity, how to show it or actualize it, how to transmit its experience, eliminating ideologies that obscure it, be it bourgeois individualism or introspective interiority, are the extended inquiries of both Cahun and Wearing. Both challenge all the constructions of identity that have conditioned our habits of perception and behavior. That said, when a curatorial agenda is driven by such a current subject, authors and artists must expect that such intentions will determine the expectations of the viewer. What are we entitled to expect from art on issues that concern us? What kind of reception and judgment do these interventions in identity call for?

These questions are all the more relevant in the case of Cahun, because, while, as with Wearing, the performative dimension of her work is at the forefront, the French photographer's body of work comes to us from the first half of the 20th Century when the vocabulary we had for discussing

“identity” now did not exist. Her works aim to cause an effect on viewers, to undergo an emotive as well as perceptive experience. Thus particularly in filigree with Cahun, it goes without saying that Wearing's proposals are not new as to their content. Cahun's curious unification of the body and mind, interiority and physical appearance, are constructions that crumble into fragmentary singularities, an experience which belongs to a subjectivity that could be called post-modern. Wearing's innovations, on the other hand, focus on the means used to update this experience. These means are laboratories, or environments of experimentation, where all the dimensions of the real are re-created and displaced.

Readers who are not ready to be seduced by either avant-garde or contemporary ideas about the fragmentation of the self will still find much to admire in this catalogue, not the least of which the high-quality reproductions of the images from the show, their generous number, and thoughtful arrangement. Approached without cynicism, at least as far as the identity issue is concerned, both sets of self-portraits testify to a certain balance between the recognizable and the unrecognizable. The problem, however, is that one becomes accustomed very quickly to the unmistakable style of both women, as well as to their features – right down to the expression of their eyes through the openings of the many masks used as obfuscating props. The relationship with the “other,” a moment of destabilization, is quickly reconnected to the recognized world of human relations.

This interesting realization questions our ability to recognize ourselves much more radically than the (now) predictable wearing of disguises, which we associate closely with other women photographers such as Catherine Opie and Cindy Sherman. (Wearing even photographs herself in character as Robert Mapplethorpe and Diane Arbus.) We can then give different meanings to these works, but the essential thing is that the given senses will be induced by the experience undergone, and not the other way around. These are photographs that give meaning to looking. They also express an essential aspect of contemporary subjectivity, namely that our interiority is composed of idiosyncrasies, whether of beliefs, fantasies, emotions, or neuroses, which have in common to be absolutely incommunicable. The private person is not necessarily secretive, since she is in any case inaccessible. On the other hand, appearance, with its social dimension, is certainly more readable. The limits of interpretation are here the truth of experience. The reception of the work places the spectator before a dilemma between its documentary value and its formal value.

Slowly inspecting the catalogue reinforces, at this crucial moment, that part of the innovation in both Cahun's and Wearing's work reside precisely in their distinctive biologies. Both artists are also masters not just of a kind of subversive mimicry but also of the technical craft of photography, from lighting to staging, composition to collage, and especially body positioning and eye contact. In this sense the two women do belong together, if not always conceptually, then technically.

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**Jean Marie Carey** is an art historian who writes about modern and contemporary art. She is working

on a book about Franz Marc.



**Gillian Wearing and Claude Cahun : Behind the Mask, Another Mask**

£24.95

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